

JTS students and grads train to be Israel tourism ambassadors

by Mark Goldwert
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In an effort to reverse the continuing erosion of Israel's tourism industry, Israel's Ministry of Tourism brought 100 students and graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America to Israel for a weeklong program to train them as "ambassadors" for the promotion of tourism to the Jewish state.

Unlike previous solidarity missions, the JTS mission was focused on engaging future Jewish leaders in an official capacity through one of Israel's ministries.

Among the future Conservative rabbis who participated was Jason A. Miller, a JTS graduate and rabbinic intern at Congregation Agudath Israel of West Essex in Caldwell, and first-year JTS student Adam Baldachin, 18, of New Providence.

"It was a different type of mission from other solidarity missions in the sense that we were commissioned to become tourism ambassadors," explained Miller, who also served as an intern at the Legov Family Israel Program Center of MetroWest from May 2002 to January 2003. The Ministry of Tourism "invested money in us.

They believe that we as future Jewish leaders could have a say in educating people."

From Jan. 8 to 13, the future rabbis toured Israel and learned how to encourage Jews to put trips to Israel at the top of their agendas.

During their stay in Israel, students heard of the devastating effects of the Intifada from some of those who have been most affected. They also met with officials of the Israeli government and representatives of the Masorti (Conservative) movement and connected with their peers at JTS' Jerusalem campus, the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies.

"It was also a personal trip for me," said Baldachin, "because in the past it's been hard for me to find a place in Israel since the Conservative movement is not as strong there. But this time I really felt its presence."

In exchange for lobbying efforts on behalf of Israeli tourism that the students are required to make before April — through speaking engagements, teach-ins, articles, and letters-to-the-editor submitted for publication — they received support from the ministry to help finance their travel.

"They trained us in Jerusalem to

understand the situation," said Miller, and explain to people that "it's not the situation they see on CNN." They also learned, he said,

living and working, will be to lead missions to Israel each year. "It will be up to me to talk to families, young people, and seniors, to com-

mission in Israel. One of the first places they visited was Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, where David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the State of Israel. There, a third-generation Israeli explained to the group that Diaspora Jews own the State of Israel as much as native-born Israelis like her, whose grandparents were born there. "She told us 'This is my homeland. This is your homeland.' It's up to us living in the Diaspora to do what we can," said Miller.

"Basically, Israel is a very safe place right now to go and visit. People who have concerns about safety should know the Israeli army is doing everything possible to make the country a safe place," said Miller.

"The only thing that was really different was when we went to Ben-Yehuda Street [in Jerusalem], and it was really sad not to see people there," recalled Baldachin.

"The media is skewed. We always see the most horrible things and people think that's all there is," said Baldachin, adding that half his family lives in Israel. "Life still goes on. They have to live."

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Jason Miller at the Kotel in Jerusalem

"how we can speak to groups we represent, or will come to represent, about what Israel really needs right now, which is tourism."

Miller will be ordained next year. He said that one of the items on his agenda, wherever he will be

fort them and tell them Israel is a place that really needs us and that we own. We have a stake in Israel's survival."

The ownership Miller spoke of was something reinforced for him and the other members of the JTS